

Punch and the Persimmons

An Elephant That Remembered.

BY HARVARD J. O'HIGGINS. Author of "The Smoke Eaters," Etc.

It was the first night of the first rehearsal in the new hippodrome, and six thousand empty theater chairs, in tier on tier and gallery, faced a prosencium-arch as wide as a street and as high as a church nave. A chorus the size of a regiment had formed in rank on a stage as big as a public square.

The conductor of an orchestra as large as a military band rose in a white sweater and tapped for silence with his baton. "Now boys," he said, "the first time you play in the house: 'The Star Spangled Banner' in B-flat. B-flat! Now then!" The orchestra rose in a body. The conductor, on his podium, raised his arms as if about to fly. And suddenly, on the silence of that empty shell of a theatre the notes of a hundred instruments struck in a tremulous unison and set the air pulsing with the throbbing of the melody.

The chorus and stage hands and ballet, and the carpenters, as well as the decorators on their scaffolds, the electricians on their ladders, the plasterers in the lobby, and the little group of lookers-on in the orchestra chairs cheered and waved their hats and whistled through their fingers. You would have thought it was the signing of another Declaration of Independence and the ringing of another Liberty Bell.

But when the last high note had shrilled out into silence, and the last persistent cheer had stopped in a self-conscious laugh, "Slivers" sat down with his worried frown unrelieved. "Besides," he went on, "I've got to make my entrance in some kind of a fool automobile that blows up, and I don't know any more about running an automobile than an elephant knows about eggs. I've never had any discrimination in killing people, either. I'm just likely's not to run over the star herself, first night." He rubbed his forehead. "It'll be worse than Punch and the persimmons."

"Slivers" had made his name as a circus clown and the ways of the stage were strange to him. He sighed.

"And who was Punch?"

"Punch," he answered in a tone of reminiscence and mild regret, "was a tom-cat in the shape of a baby elephant. I wish at I had him now. He'd be better than this trick automobile full of fireworks, anyhow." He added: "I wish I'd taken a job was offered me once—running a steam roller on a macadam road. It'd only run one way, so they always used it on up hill jobs and let it back down of itself. That was the part of the business that wasn't cushion tired. You had to hang on to the smoke stack and let her rip till she brought up against something that was hard. But it'd 'a been a good training for this stunt."

There was no indication in his lean face that he was conscious of any humor in this suggestion. His eyes were fixed sadly on a chorus of milkmaids, in street costumes, dancing and pirouetting around the stage with the mechanical air of a rehearsal.

"Did you own him—the elephant?" "Punch," he shook his head. "I worked with him—but Burke owned him—Wally Burke—and Burke was half elephant himself, and half Hindu and the rest Irish. Did you ever see in one of those fat China humpty-dumps, they keep in a wash-house with a long black moustache and a waist like a watermelon? Wally Burke was the only original of them all.

"And what was it that happened with the persimmons?"

He thought it over. "We were down south with Morris"—with a one ring show. And Burke and the elephants were all the animals we had, except two old maid lonesomes that were too feeble to do knitting. We used to use their den for the band-wagon, with seats on top. They were no good, those two sissies. When we lost Hinch—that'd used to blow the big bass tuba—we tried to get the lions to roar in where Hinch used to come in on the tune; but you couldn't squeeze a roar out of those two old women short of putting through a clothes wringer. Besides, Burke wouldn't prod 'em up.

"He had some sort of a Hindu notion about treating the brutes with decorum, the same as if they knew when you didn't take of your lid to them and say 'Please.' And after Punch and him'd do their turn with me in the ring, he'd take that leather skinned rubber nose off to the animal tent, and powwow and gabble to him and stroke him and feed him peppermints, like he was an archbishop.

"He was a freak, Burke was; but he certainly did know how to make a parlor call on an elephant. He'd taught Punch to sit down on his far end and

shake hands with his trunk, and listen to you as innocent and as solemn eyed as a picaninny with a bottle of molasses. Only if Burke wasn't there he'd listen to you a minute, and then feel around in the straw till he'd filled his fire-hose full of sand and then blow it in your face so hard you could go away and strike matches on yourself.

He was the son of a baboon and an india-rubber water bottle, Punch was. He had the manners of one, and the figure of the other. "Well, that was all right, too," Burke and me did the turn with him, both together; and if he didn't like me he was open to take it out of sulking and back-grunting to Burke. I told Burke he wasn't bringing the brute up right, and he said he'd send him to a kindergarten when the circus closed. He thought he knew elephant, I knew I didn't. That was all I knew; but it saved me from being made a haggis of by that smooty pile driver when he started after me flat-footed one day, with his pig's tail in the air.

"That was down in Tennessee. The train'd stopped that morning in a little jerk-water town, to fix up the engine, and we hadn't been fed since along about five o'clock the day before; so when Burke sights a pie shop across the road, he sings out: 'You can settle with me when I gets back'—and he starts on a run for the delicatessen shanty to get us all a mouthful. We hung out of the car windows with our mouth open, like a nest of young robins, and watched till the train give a bump and began to pull out. And then we yelled.

"Burke didn't wait to get his change, at that, but came out of the shop running like a thief, with a pile of pies on one arm and a loaf of bread and of tinned grub and things under the other. He ramped across lots faster than I ever saw a fat man cover ground before; but when he swung into the tracks the train was sliding along more than fast. He sprinted and picked up a length but he could see't he wasn't going to make it with the load of groceries, and he began to drop the tinned grub to lighten up. We were screeching like a bunch of Indians, and hanging out the back platform trying to reach him, and he was up to his chin in pies, and gasping and goggling like a drowning man, dribbling bread and biscuits and hunks of cheese all down the line. And the faster he dropped 'em the faster the train leaked away from him." He paused to scratch his ear thoughtfully.

"He threw over all the pies, and then didn't catch it. The last we saw of him he was sitting on the rails wiping oil and gravel off a busted pie that he'd gone back for, picking out a clean place to bite into it."

The laugh that followed moved him to a mild interest. He nodded. "It was alright for Burke, he had a half mile of pies to eat back over. But we didn't get a blamed doughnut till we got to the lot and sat into a parboiled rooster in to the cook's tent. And that was the second month we'd been eating hen meat. I wouldn't 'v kicked on that either, but there was no one but me to fondle the elephant.

"I coaxed him up from the train to the lot with a hay fork, and when we were about there, he broke away and got into an orchard, instead of steering to the tent where he belonged. I caught him up against a tree and chained him by the hind leg while he was busy tearing off a branch to pick his teeth with, and then I left him there and hunted for the cook tent.

"I picked up a persimmon near the fence. Did any of you fellahs ever chew a green persimmon?"

None of us ever had.

He nodded again, more grimly. "There 're some people need a touch of hard luck to mellow 'em up, and that is the way with the persimmon. It ain't ever right till its been frost bit. It looks all right; its yellow, and it tastes sweet as first; but it draws up the inside of your mouth like lining of an old boot, and the more water you drink, the worse it gets. After the first two chews I took out of mine, I dropped it and ran for the cook tent so's to get something to eat before the lockjaw'd shut up my main entrance altogether.

"The chicken was a tight fit. But I was getting it down all right, longways, in Indian file, when we heard the squealing of a whole menagerie of wild elephants tearing each other from limb to limb—and I knew it was that pup Punch. And it was. I'd tied him to a persimmon tree, and he'd stripped off a bar'l of green fruit from the branches, and chewed 'em up.

"When I got to him, he was sitting up on his tail, his mouth sucked in like a sloth bear begging peanuts, and his under lip trembling with whimpers. He was wringing his trunk the way Burke had taught him to ring the dinner bell in our act when he wanted a drink, and he was about the pitifullest-looking fool of an infant elephant a man ever nursed.

"Of course I got scared, and started the crowd fetching pails of water. And when he'd blowed the first bucket down his orifice, he let out a new sort of a crampell whine, and the persimmons gripped his pipes, and he laid over on his fat sides and blubbered and blew bubbles like a kid with the colic.

"Say that was before I was married. We were all a lot of old bachelors on the job. We didn't know what to do, and Punch wouldn't let us try to learn. As soon as anyone got near him, he whipped out for a belt with his trunk and squalled like he was teething. After he'd missed me by an inch two or three times I threw a bucket of water on him and went off to get old man Morris.

"And when I got back to him, he was feeling better—a little red in the face and teary around the eyelashes and trembly in the under lip—but better. The persimmons had let up on him and he was lying back and thinking it over. 'He's all right now, Morris says.' 'Leave him here till Burke comes. We don't need him in the p'rade.' So I got him a truss of hay and left him with with it.

"But Burke didn't come. Burke didn't come, and the afternoon show did. And it was up to me. 'Oh the elephant's all right,' the old man said, 'He's as mild as milk. I'll send Eyres in with you. Go ahead.' Eyres was a sort of assistant keeper to Burke, but he wasn't anything but a gat-toothed New-England mud-puller that didn't know anything more about orphan elephants than I did. I made him up from Burke's trunk, and started him off to fetch the brute, and I says to myself: 'That's all right. Punch'll think its Burke, and if he has any kick coming he'll take it out on Eyres. That lets me out.' And I put on my grease, just grinning at myself in the glass.

"When I comes to the door to take the turn, I finds Punch waiting there with a big ruffle around his neck and the bow on his tail, as meek as Sunday school. He wasn't saying a word, just reaching out for a tuft of grass here and a bit of paper there, sort of turning things over and smelling around no end int'rested in nothing at all. He lets on not to notice me when I comes up; but I stands off, and keeps an eye on him, and pretty soon I sees Mr. Punch slide a little wicked look around at me, and when he finds me watching him, he gets double busy again, blowing dust over his back and fanning himself with his ears. And I says to myself: 'Here's where I am going to do Japanese juggling with a stick 'o dynamite,' and I move over on the other side of Eyres.

"Well, that was all right, too. Eyres went right ahead as if he had a kitten on a string, and I kept my distance. We paraded into the ring, making faces at the little gaffers on the 'blues,' and we put out the tables and the chairs, and started business. Punch sat himself down and straightened his collar, and Eyres sat himself down and straightened his collar, and Punch knocked off Eyres's hat—the way Burke had taught him—and then Punch rang the dinner bell, and I come running up with the canvas-pie. And that's where the trouble started.

"I says to myself: 'There's some-

thing about this pie that smells of persimmons—or maybe its on my hands.' And then when I sees Punch looks at it, I thinks, 'Me and persimmons are located together for all time in that beggar's memory, I guess.' He was smelling around it, suspicious, with his pipe-line, grunting and talking to himself. And then he lifted the flap in the crust and put his nose in, and instead of fishing out the apples that ought to have been there—but weren't in there, because some hungry babo, and we never found out who it was) had eaten all the pippins and filled the cursed pie with green persimmons—why, Punch out with a snort and grabbed the dinner-bell and began ringing it like house afire. That was my cue to run up with a bucket of drink, and I ran up almost almighty slow, and when he saw me coming he put his two big feet down on the table and smashed it flat and come on over to smash me.

"Say, were you ever chased by a squealing locomotive with a lasso for a cowcatcher? If you ever are, don't try to dodge. I didn't. I made a flying leap from the middle of that ring, and lit on the other side of the tent and

dived under the seats and crawled out under the canvas and climbed a tree. And that tent was humming like a saw-mill. There was just one continual wild yell on top of one continual smash-crash-grind-and-mash of circus seats, and one unending swarm of Tennessee folks crawling out under the flaps and hunting the horizon.

"If it'd been a three ringed show, I'd 'a stayed longer, but I began to see that Punch wasn't going to take long before he'd sorted over that one ring collection of strangers and come on my trail again—and the tree I was on wasn't high enough to make me feel easy. So I slid down and began to beat across lots into tall timber. And the first man I met was Wally Burke, coming up from the depot, off a freight. 'What the blazes's up?' he sing out. And when I says 'Punch!' he grabs for me, and I dodged, and caught the caboose of the freight, and went on to the next stop. I didn't want any arguments neither with him nor Punch. When the circus came on next day, they'd both quit and I was out of a job."

He smiled regretfully. Say, but

those were the good old days, all right! This theater business is good enough for chorus girls and glad-rag artists; but it don't—it don't smell right somehow. Did you ever smell a circus—when—Eh?"

The stage carpenter had reached in from the aisle and touched Slivers on the shoulder. "That automobile's in the wings," he said, "if you want to try it now."

Slivers settled his hat with both hands, and stood up. "Good-by, boys," he said. "If y'ever see Burke or any of the old bunch, tell them I died game."

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